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AUTHOR Duke, Charles R.
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ABSTRACT

Remedial writers tend to be students who have never written very much, who come from families or neighborhoods in which more than one language may be spoken, and who have sensed their problems but have been unable or unwilling to do much to alleviate the difficulties. Unfortunately, the environment and attitudes of many college remedial programs often represent only one more cage for many of these students. Because little stature is given to individuals who work in remedial programs, many tend to be staffed by unqualified personnel. This situation can lead to serious attitude problems that inhibit students' progress. Structure is another major cause of the failure of remedial writing programs: they lack flexibility, clearly defined goals, and materials that are matched with the learners. Another concern is what happens to remedial writers when they leave a basic writing program. The supportive atmosphere of such a program may lull them into thinking they will receive special treatment everywhere. They also tend to have poor reading skills, and the process of catching up is slow and painful for them. Some suggestions for improving basic writing courses include developing better teacher training, educating the public about the need for staff and materials, working with publishers to get better materials, and continuing to investigate better ways to teach remedial writing students. (TJ)

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Charles R. Duke
Department of English
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky 42071

Why Our Efforts with Remedial Writers Fail

The term "remedial" as applied to writing has existed for some time. As a matter of fact, a course in remedial English has been listed in UCLA's catalog since the early 1900's. Back when many of us were in school, remedial writing courses were in the curriculum and frequently referred to, at least in the dormitories, as "bonehead" English. But I do not recall any lasting stigma attached to anyone enrolled in such a course; at the institution I attended, bonehead English was just something that happened to people and had to be endured. However, our remedial population then and the remedial population now may not bear too close a resemblance. If we want to pinpoint the time when the shift in population occurred, we might consider the appearance of open admissions in the 60's as the turning point. Probably no other higher education policy decision has done more to thrust the problems of remediation upon colleges and universities and at a time when they were least prepared to cope with the results.

When one asks individuals to define what they mean by the term "remedial writer," some general agreement on broad characteristics emerges, but a fairly wide range of disagreement surfaces as to the exact point at which a student becomes remedial and is treated differently from a student who is "regular."

For example, the following items have been cited as the most prevalent problems of the remedial writer:[1]

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1. Overuse of pejorative and honorific words and intensifiers such as "wonderful," "great," and "very nice"

2. Abrupt introductions beginning with: "I am going to write about;" "I am going to describe;" also abrupt conclusions: "and that is why we must do it"

3. Embellishment and fancy words - straining for the $600 word when a ten cent one will do

4. Selection of a word that they can spell rather than the more accurate words they can not

5. Inconsistent use of talker style, writer style which reveals a lack of awareness about audience

6. Predominance of simple sentences

7. Extensive use of sentences following subject-verb pattern

8. An absence of transitional devices

On the other hand, Mina Shaughnessy, whose fine work has been made available through the publication of Errors and Expectations (Oxford University Press, 1977), suggests that remedial writing students can be recognized by the following characteristics:[2]

a. They produce a small amount of writing with a large percentage of errors--approximately 15-35 errors per 300 words.

b. They make frequent errors in handling the so-called regular features of standard English, particularly past tense of regular verbs and plural inflections of nouns.

c. They make numerous spelling errors that seem to exhibit no pattern.

d. They express themselves in syntactic thickets so dense that even they end up not knowing what they were trying to say.

e. They experience frequent problems with punctuation.

f. They are restricted in their writing, but not their speaking, to a very narrow range of syntactical and rhetorical options; these, in turn, lead them to write rudimentary prose.

Few people would claim that characteristics in both lists do not mark at least some remedial writers. However, the whole problem of

classifying these students is not quite as simple as those characteristics would suggest. A Yale, a Harvard, and a UCLA, for example, may have what they consider a remedial writing population, but those institutions' tolerance levels for errors are probably much lower than most of us are familiar with. For example, in Betty Bamberg's study of the freshman writing population in 1975 at UCLA, students whose scores on the College English Achievement Test fell below 600 were given an objective examination and an impromptu essay; those not scoring well were placed in Subject A, a remedial writing course.[3] But teachers rarely see substantial numbers of students with Board scores of 600. Because of these variations in the population of remedial writing programs, it is increasingly difficult for teachers to compare notes or even trust the literature they read about remedial writing. The literature is full of references to developmental English, basic writing, enrichment activity, supplemental skill building, and writing labs; we have even slipped so low on occasion as to speak of English for the disadvantaged or handicapped; and just the other day I came across a reference to English for the terminal student. The general tone of most of these labels suggests that we are dealing with medical problems--and we reinforce that idea by sending many of our students to clinics and labs for diagnosis and prescriptions.

Simply having all of these characteristics outlined for us, then, does not provide us with a complete picture. We can infer from students' performance and from discussions with them that they have never written very much, in or out of school, that they often come from families or neighborhoods where more than one language may be spoken, and that they have often sensed their problems but been unable or

unwilling to actually do much to alleviate the difficulties.

No matter what definition we use, however, all the evidence seems to suggest that the roots of the problems with remedial writing students are anchored in experiences that occur before college. Some of these experiences we may have little control over, while we may be the central cause for others. In the latter case, we are beginning to document through case studies and student autobiographies, what some of the causes for later failure may be. Elizabeth Metzger, for example, in a case study of two college students and four secondary school students from working class families, who had been labeled failing writers, discovered that none had received any consistent teaching of writing and that what instruction had been received favored mechanics and usage over other aspects of writing.[4] This pattern was repeated in the study by Betty Bamberg of students enrolled in Subject A and English 1 at UCLA. Emphasis on composition instruction in high school for Subject A students was low; with the exception of grammar instruction, less than half of the Subject A students had received as many as three or more semesters of instruction for any writing aspect. And even among English 1 students, there was no aspect of writing which received three or more sememsters of instruction. Interestingly enough, in spite of the present call by the public for a move back to basics, the data in the UCLA study failed to establish that students were not receiving substantial instruction in grammar. Fifty-eight per cent of the students in English 1 and fifty-three per cent of Subject A students had received three or more semesters of instruction. This leads to the speculation that the higher proportion of errors in grammar and mechanics found in the writing of remedial students could be attributed to ineffective

instruction rather than too little instruction.

Studies such as the two previously cited suggest that much of our approach to teaching writing at the elementary and secondary levels may be suspect. The traditional K-12 curriculum, for example, encourages activities with simple sentences and short paragraphs up to at least grade ten, and there is no consistent guidance for developing multigraphed writing below grade nine. As a result, we have inadvertently condoned the non-teaching of extended writing until late in high school and at that point it may be too late for some students to ever catch up. Students' account of their early experiences with writing would seem to bear this out.

One of the first writing assignments I request of students is an autobiographical account of how their present attitude toward writing was shaped. The autobiography is not to be graded. It is, instead, an attempt to understand the perceptions of the students' toward their writing experiences. I suggest that they might consider the following questions in coming to grips with the subject:

a. When did you first begin to write?

b. What specific experiences, events or people do you feel have affected your learning to write since you entered school? Why were these significant?

c. What do you think is necessary to improve your writing or to overcome your attitude toward it?

d. How important do you think writing is to your future, in school and out?

As might be expected, reading these accounts is fascinating. I have gained a better understanding of students' apprehensions about writing from such an assignment, and it has helped me immeasurably in tailoring my instruction accordingly. Here are a few excerpts from a variety of papers:

Those awful red marks all over my essays, book report or term paper never seemed to end. In fact, my writing has always left plenty of room for criticism. I would sit hours writing, proofreading and checking spelling before passing my work in only to get it back all marked up. I never have been excited about writing, I think mainly because I never had a teacher willing to sit down and really teach the art of writing.

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I found in grade school that as long as you participated in class, you didn't have to do any homework at all. I flunked a lot of classes that way, but I would always pass at the end of the year. I would just flatout refuse to do any homework. So often I can remember my teacher saying, 'And this paper will be due no later than Friday, or else.' Friday would roll around and I would hear, 'Peter, where is your homework?' Up until about the ninth grade I said something like 'I left it home' or anything else that came to mind. Then about the ninth grade I simply said, 'I didn't do it.' When asked why, I said, 'I didn't want to.' That always ended it. In English class, as long as I actively participated in class, I still got a passing grade.

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Penmanship was important at this school and I was terrible at it. The nuns awarded excellence in penmanship with a variety of impressive religious stamps placed on the papers. Size, and quantity let the student know exactly what she thought of your work. I was happy with a small stamp of baby Jesus but the other kids not only got baby Jesus, but Mary, Joseph, the three kings and the whole manger as well. Being totally outclassed and getting no satisfaction from it, I quit trying.

One final account seems to summarize the experience of many:

My Writing Career

The first paper I ever wrote was a four page report on Thomas Jefferson. I received a very good grade on the paper. That was when I was in the fourth grade. I really liked it at first then in the fifth grade I had a bad teacher. She made the whole class write out of a handwriting book just to improve our penmanship. As you can see she did not do too well. I wrote another paper in the sixth grade, it was on the "Swiss Family Robinson." I received a "C" on that report.

When I went into junior high, I felt pretty good about my writing skills. I was told all through grade school. "You will have to write a lot in junior high school." Well, in my first year of junior high, seventh grade, I didn't write one paper either. I started wondering when I would ever write one.

When I left junior high for high school, my teacher told me you better watch out you will be writing a lot of papers. I entered my freshman year thinking I guess I am going to finally get to write a paper. I didn't write one then, in fact, I didn't write one all thru high school.

When I came to _____ I dreaded English 101. My first semester the fall of '77 I failed. In the spring semester I tried to take 101 and 100 at the same time. I ended up dropping 101 and passing 100. This semester I am going to try again. I have become very disillusioned with writing.

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That disillusionment is significant and cannot be overlooked in our work with remedial students. Marie Jean Lederman in an article called "Open Admissions and Teaching English: Birds Caged and Uncaged" (Educational Forum, March 1973), tells of reading the responses of twenty-seven remedial students who wrote on the following topic for a placement essay: "You will be born again tomorrow morning. You may come back as anything you choose--except yourself. What would you like to come back as?" Their responses were as follows:

9 as birds	1 as the first Black U.S. president
3 as millionaires	1 as a doctor
2 as mice	1 as a flower
2 as dogs	1 as a tree
2 as better people	
2 as members of the opposite sex	

The explanations for these choices are revealing. One mouse suggested that he or she would be equipped with swiftness to escape danger; a potential dog indicated, "I myself would like to be free because that is something I am not now. Then, being a dog is really dynamite because most people like dogs rather than children because they couldn't answer them back." And from the birds, this response

is typical: "A bird comes into life with only the problem of living, and living is the simplest problem of all. To live is to be free.... Birds are born with no pressures in life.... If a bird is stupid, fine, but the thing is he wanted to be it himself and that is freedom." Throughout all the other responses from the would-be birds came the same concern for freedom--certainly an understandable yet poignant cry. And that cry brings us to one of the primary areas where we frequently fail with these students when they arrive at the college or university level. The very environment and attitudes of many remedial programs represent simply one more cage for many of these students.

Most remedial programs are traditionally under-funded, housed in depressing and cramped facilities, and usually viewed by academic departments, including English, as ugly step-children. In some cases the programs have been abandoned entirely by the academic community and turned loose to fend for themselves as separate learning or study skills centers. Few people directly involved in working with basic writing students in these programs have ever received training specifically designed for that kind of population. What training we have received focused mainly on "noticing what students learn, not how they learn it," on observing "what they do to writing, not what writing does to them.[5] Instructors in basic writing programs are most often junior faculty who view their time in the program as only temporary or they are teaching assistants who are primarily concerned with gaining a degree and subsidizing their efforts while doing so. Frequently people in these programs have had little teaching experience and even less teaching writing. Very little stature is given to individuals who work in basic writing programs; in a number of instances, people who direct such programs have been denied promotion and tenure because they have not been engaging in "academic" activity.

This lack of qualified personnel and the presence of low morale can lead to serious attitude problems which inhibit students' progress in a remedial program. Teachers and administrators in remedial writing programs often discuss basic writing students in terms of percentages and FTE's rather than as individuals with unique problems and needs. Much talk, for example, concerns "bringing the remedial student up to an appropriate level." Yet Mina Shaughnessy points out that "our experience with the unprepared adult writer suggests that the pattern of development is marked by puzzling plateaus and even retreats in some areas and remarkable leaps into competence in others, producing very different writing records from those we are accustomed to in better prepared students, refusing throughout to bring the unprepared writers into parallel courses with their better prepared peers."[6] These discussions also fail to reveal any awareness on the part of teachers and administrators that <u>they</u> may have basic problems and that they need to move to more appropriate levels themselves.

Shaughnessy has suggested a four stage developmental scale for traditionally prepared English teachers who are learning to work with basic writing students.[7] These stages reveal one of the fundamental reasons why many teachers fail when working with the remedial writer. At the lowest level of the scale are those teachers who see themselves as "guarding the tower," protecting the academic community against outsiders who do not seem to belong to the inner circle of learners. Faced with the first efforts of basic writing students, the instructor may be appalled to think that he or she is responsible for causing dramatic improvement in such writers. The first reaction is to flunk the entire group. Naturally, students sense this and have reinforced for them an idea they have harbored for some time--they can't write, or at least they can not write academically. The struggle between upholding pre-

sumed academic traditions and doing one's duty in setting out the material to be learned can weigh heavily on the instructor and the student. Occasionally, though, a glimmer of understanding may begin to appear in the instructor; some students may even begin to look as though they might catch up, but only, of course, after great amounts of hard work.

Such recognition moves the instructor to the second stage of development, known as "converting the natives." Confident that what he or she has to bring to the natives is, in and of itself, sufficient, the instructor pays little attention to whether the material relates to the knowledge students may already possess about the language; models are presented in rapid succession, but whenever the student writes, the models seem to disappear. Faced with this recurring phenomenon, the instructor may begin to question why students cannot learn these things. Somehow the awareness that what the teacher treats as normal, proper and seemingly uncomplicated is really not that way at all for the student may surface in the consciousness of the instructor. If so, he or she may move to the third level known as "sounding the depths."

At this point some semblance of real understanding begins to emerge; patterns of errors are spotted, searches for the reasons behind the errors begin and the instructor accepts the challenge of dealing with what the student has brought to the writing class. When this stage is fully recognized, the instructor is ready for the highest point on the scale, the point which Shaughnessy calls "diving in." The instructor throws away preconceptions, starts anew with the student at the student's level and works with the student to move ahead as far as possible, always searching for new

approaches and new understandings which will increase the speed of development but never at the expense of the students' understanding or confidence. Unfortunately, the number of basic writing instructors--or writing instructors in general--who reach this fourth level is very limited. Hence the majority of students fail to receive the kind of help they really need.

Although poorly conceived curriculum in the early grades, and basic training and attitude problems are major causes of our failures with remedial writers, they are not the only ones. Structure in the remedial program is a potential source for failure as well. A program's method of screening and diagnosing students' difficulties and then developing prescriptions to meet those needs is crucial to success. In many programs, students are placed according to SAT or ACT scores; if the program is well organized, students will be given additional tests and writing samples to determine strengths and weaknesses. In far too many instances, however, students simply are thrown together in one group and given the same materials to work with. Studies such as that done by John Higgins, however, suggest that within remedial groups there may be a definite need for further grouping.[8] Higgins discovered, for example, that over half of all the errors found in his students' writing were not rooted in grammatical difficulties; his population seemed to divide into those students who needed help with diction and spelling and those who needed help with regular verb endings, punctuation misunderstandings and similar problems. He concluded that within a remedial group the needs of the lower students differ sufficiently from the better so that two groups should be created, the upper focusing on diction-related topics and the lower on such grammatical functions as regular verb endings. This lower group also would need to have the experience of the upper group at a later time. Only a small number of remedial writing

programs have the necessary flexibility to achieve this division.

Many programs lack clearly defined goals, leading instructors to do whatever seems appropriate at the time without having any clear idea of how such activity may fit into an overall solution of a student's problems. Because many staff people do not know much about different teaching strategies, programs tend to use those methods which have been employed in regular classes; in most cases these take the form of lecture, exercise material--frequently programmed--and drill sheets. Hence, instead of getting a new approach to their problems, students receive approaches which already have not worked for them in the past.

This situation need not exist. A study by Doris Sutton and Daniel Arnold compared the results of tutorial, individualized instruction with that of regular instruction in remedial classes. In almost all cases, students who had received the individualized approach performed better on post-test instruments than did those students in the regular remedial class.[9] Although research results on similar studies are not in complete agreement,[10] they do suggest that we often have failed to adjust our teaching approaches adequately for the population with which we are dealing. In fact, we consistently tend to miscalculate how sophisticated our remedial students are in some of their language awareness and yet how immature they may be in other cases; consequently we frequently ignore the complexity of the tasks we give them and we fail to locate with any consistency where to begin with each one and what is supposed to follow what.

But even if we were more flexible, there would be the never-ceasing problems of matching materials with learner. Many texts presently on the market presumably are designed for remedial or developmental courses. A close examination of them, however, reveals that they are merely old vinegar--and not very good vinegar at that--poured into new bottles.

John Higgins' study of remedial student needs, previously cited, also examined a number of current textbooks to determine what, if any, match might be found between students' needs and the emphases in the textbooks. His results suggest that the writers of such textbooks may not thoroughly understand the population for which they are writing.[11]

Higgins found, for example, that the kinds of fault which many remedial texts deal with, such as adjective-adverb confusion, nominative-objective case confusion, dangling modifiers, and capitalization did not appear that frequently in the writing of his remedial students. Many texts devote considerable time, for example, to irregular verb lists, but few offer practice in regular verb endings--one of the most troublesome items for many basic writing students. General proofreading, a skill almost always lacking in remedial students, receives very little attention in comparison with more esoteric items such as the distinction between "who" and "whom." Such findings support the suspicion that many remedial writing instructors have long harbored about the inadequacy of commercially prepared materials. But many instructors continue to use such materials, providing another source for failure with students.

A final cause for concern about the failure of our efforts with remedial writers is what happens to these writers when they leave us. In the instances where remedial programs do consider the uniqueness of the learner, unconsciously they may be creating future problems for the student. Nested as they may be in the supportive atmosphere of a remedial program, students may be lulled into believing that they will receive the same treatment on the outside. Almost all basic writers enter the regular academic climate with incomplete knowledge of the rituals and ways of winning arguments in academic discourse. Too many remedial students write only in the expressive or narrative modes and, consequently, can not handle the shift to argumentation.

In many instances as well, remedial programs have failed to consider the relationship between reading and writing and how that relationship may affect the remedial writer upon entering regular academic courses. Traditionally the two areas of writing and reading have been kept separated, and it is far more common nowadays for the student to have writing problems identified than it is reading problems. However, Andrea Lunsford in a study done at Ohio State University offers support for the idea that all language skills are related--that the level of reading comprehension is related to the complexity of sentence formation (or syntactic maturity) and that both are related to mature, synthetic thought processes.[12] Hence it would appear that we have failed the student once more if we make no concerted effort to bring reading and writing instruction together and treat them as a unit.

But the problem of re-entry does not end there. Far too often there are too few people in the regular academic programs who fully comprehend the slow and painful progress that the basic writer must experience, and that the necessary "catching up" seldom can be accomplished in a one or even two semester course in basic writing. Faced with the attitude of those who "guard the tower," faced with the entire climate of "academic writing," the basic writing student easily can lose confidence and eventually drop out of school, even after demonstrating the potential to continue.

If this happens, we have failed more than the student has. We have failed to educate faculty to the purposes of a developmental program. If good liaison exists between the regular academic programs and the remedial one, the transition can be made more easily. In some instances, alternative tracks or sections have been devised to keep the writer on a developmental plan, still using many of the techniques of the remedial program but applying them directly to the requirements of the regular aca-

demic program. The student is phased into the regular academic offerings slowly, getting adjusted and receiving support during the transition. The old sink or swim theory has no relevance for the case of the basic writer.

All these areas of potential failure are not without solution. We can, for example, make far greater efforts than we have in our teacher training institutions to prepare future teachers for the teaching of writing; we can help them understandithe problems and the perspectives of the remedial writer and devise strategies for helping such writers overcome their problems. We can work to educate the public of the need for more staff and more materials to meet the needs of the remedial population. We can insist that those people who work in remedial programs at the college and university level be specially trained and that they be given equal stature with other faculty. We can work with publishers to produce materials which will be more directly applicable to the needs of remedial writers. And we can continue to experiment, to investigate, and to report to each other the results of our work with different programs, students, and strategies.

Because dealing with the present type of remedial student is a phenomenon for most of us, we must look to our failures as learning experiences and bend our efforts unceasingly toward achieving a better winning percentage.

Notes

[1]Elizabeth Metzger, "Individualizing Remedial Writing at the College Level" (ERIC ED 113 733), 1975.

[2]"Basic Writing" in Teaching Composition; 10 Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 139.

[3]"Composition Instruction Does Make a Difference: A Comparison of the High School Preparation of College Freshmen in Regular and Remedial English Classes," Research in the Teaching of English (February 1978), 47-59.

[4]"Causes of Failure to Write: Exploratory Case Studies at Grade Seven, Grade Ten, and College Level." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1977.

[5]Mina Shaughnessy, "Open Admissions and the Disadvantaged Student," College Composition and Communication (December 1975), 403.

[6]"Some Needed Research on Writing," College Composition and Communication (December 1977), 318.

[7]"Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," College Composition and Communication (October 1976), 234-239.

[8]"Remedial Students' Needs vs. Emphases in Text-Workbooks," College Composition and Communication (May 1973), 188-192.

[9]"The Effects of Two Methods of Compensatory Freshman English," Research in the Teaching of English (Summer 1974), 241-249.

[10]See P. L. Jenkins, "The Relative Effectiveness of Two Methods of Teaching Written and Spoken English." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1952; R.C. Maize, "Two Methods of Teaching English Composition to Retarded College Freshmen," Journal of Educational Psychology (1954), 22-28; K.C. Sanberg, "Writing Laboratories--a New Approach to Teaching Composition"(ERIC ED 018 799), 1969.

[11]See also Leo Rockas, "Teaching Literacy," College Composition and Communication (October 1977), 273-275.

[12]"What We Know--And Don't Know--About Remedial Writing," College Composition and Communication (February 1978), 47-52.